

US government preparing for mass arrests in Puerto Rico

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The US Justice Department is reportedly sending 300 federal marshals to the small island of Vieques, off the eastern coast of Puerto Rico, in an apparent preparation for massive civil disobedience anticipated in the event that the Pentagon orders the resumption of live-fire shelling exercises there.

Protests erupted on the island after a stray bomb claimed the life of one Puerto Rican civilian employed by the Navy and injured four others in April. Popular outrage over the incident forced Puerto Rico's Governor Pedro Rosello to form a Special Commission on Vieques, which recommended an immediate and permanent cessation of military exercises on the island.

A second panel, however, was formed by the Pentagon and issued a recommendation to the Clinton administration that, while live-fire exercises should be phased out over the next five years, to order an immediate halt to the operations would endanger "national security."

Talks held at the Pentagon last Monday between Defense Secretary William Cohen and Rosello's chief of staff produced no agreement. The USS Eisenhower battle group is scheduled to initiate live-fire exercises on the 20-mile-long island early next month. Protesters continue to occupy the bombing range and say they will not leave peacefully if the Navy tries to move them.

The island has remained a militarized zone for almost 60 years. Together with the neighboring island-municipality of Culebra, the Navy took it over, forcing the local population off their land and into narrow zones while the bulk of the territory was turned into a firing range.

In 1975, after years of protest and an occupation of bomb sites by the island's inhabitants, the Navy was forced to withdraw from Culebra. Over the past 25 years, however, it has continued to shell Vieques, using

it as a principal training ground for the gunners of the Atlantic Fleet.

Protesters are now occupying the Vieques firing range and would have to be removed by force if the Pentagon's recommendation for a resumption of the exercises is carried out.

According to the report issued by the Puerto Rican commission, US military exercises on the island "have restricted the residential area and the commercial activity of the civilian population to a strip of territory approximately three miles long in the center of the island." They have also meant restrictions on fishing, the principal industry of the island's inhabitants.

One significant finding in the document is that the Navy has employed depleted uranium-tipped radioactive shells in its military exercises. A Navy spokesman confirmed that one month before the fatal "accident" at Vieques, a fighter jet mistakenly fired 236 of the shells, only 57 of which were subsequently recovered. The shells, which take years to degrade, threaten the island's water, atmosphere and soil.

Not coincidentally, the Puerto Rican panel discovered that the cancer rate on Vieques is double the average rate on the Puerto Rican mainland. It also has a substantially higher infant mortality rate.

Whatever the final decision about the live-fire exercises on Vieques, the gunnery range is just one element in a network of military bases that have turned Puerto Rico into a US launching pad for military aggression throughout Latin America.

In recent months the military presence on Puerto Rico, held for a century as a US colony, has been substantially augmented by the redeployment of the headquarters of the US Southern Command from the Panama Canal to Fort Buchanan, just outside San Juan.

The Pentagon already has the Ramey Field air base in

Aguadilla to the West, the Camp Santiago National Guard base in Salinas in the South, major radar installations that monitor all of the Caribbean and South America and the Roosevelt Roads naval base, the largest installation outside the continental United States.

The protests that have erupted over Vieques are an indication of the mounting tension created by the US military presence combined with dissatisfaction over the high levels of poverty and unemployment that prevail throughout the island.



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